

## Salvation: Healing the Wounds of Existence

### Jeremiah 8:18-9:1

I know I've spoken to you before about one of my favourite theologian/authors, the late Marcus Borg. Borg wrote at least a dozen books on "religion" – specifically "Christianity". I've read – [and facilitated study groups] – on every one of them!

Borg was popular, I think, because he managed to say – [in understandable, straightforward language] – what many of us in the church have believed or suspected for years, but didn't have the language – [or possibly the courage] – to say. Borg has helped many, many Christians to **re-frame** – [and consequently **re-claim**] – their faith. Borg has helped many people stay in the church.

About 10 years ago, he wrote a book called "**Speaking Christian**", with the (more descriptive) sub-title: "**Why Christian Words Have Lost their Meaning and Power, and How They Can Be Restored**".

The point of his book is pretty much evident in the sub-title – **it seems like so much of the language we use in the Christian Church has been hijacked by the Christian Right, and is no longer meaningful or helpful to many of us in the more progressive mainline Christian church.**

Much of Christian language, he says, has become a **stumbling block** for many Christians in our time.

And this is also something **I've** been concerned about and committed to for 43 years in my own ministry – [in sermons, in study groups, and in one-on-one conversations]:

- **reclaiming** religious language – **taking it back** – **deconstructing** it (one of my favourite words, "deconstructing") – and then **reconstructing** it in a way that it is once again helpful and meaningful to those of us in the mainline church;
- **OR** alternatively, (in some cases), reaching the conclusion that some Christian words, some Christian language, has become so corrupted that it's **beyond** redemption, and we need to just **"let it go"** and find **different** words to talk about the same thing.

So this is what I plan to do over the next 3 weeks, in a 3-part sermon series on “**Christian Language**”. And you can see from today’s sermon title that the “word-of-the-day” is the word “**salvation**”.

Now “salvation” is a concept in Christian theology and language that **is** worth redeeming, I think. It’s also an idea that, when used in a certain way (by the sidewalk preachers in Dundas Square, for example) – [as in, “**are you saved?**” or “**have you been saved?**” or “**have you accepted Jesus as your Saviour?**”] – feels aggressive, pushy, disrespectful and emotionally manipulative to many of us.

It is probably accurate to say that “salvation” has never been a ‘popular topic’ in the United Church (at least not in my lifetime) – although it **is** in our Basis of Union, spelled out in quite formal and orthodox language: that “***for us and for our salvation God became flesh in Jesus Christ***” and so on. So...

- **on the one hand**, we may be **uncomfortable** with the way the notion of “salvation” is talked about in more conservative, evangelical circles...
- **but, on the other hand**, all evidence points to the fact that “salvation” is a **central teaching** of Christianity. It’s in Scripture, it’s there in The Basis of Union of the United Church, it’s in our creeds and hymns and liturgies and prayers.

But I would argue that the notion of “salvation” has been and still is **grossly misunderstood**, **often trivialized**, and **frequently** used in a **manipulative** way...as a “weapon” to clobber people over the head.

The obsession about “salvation” being about what happens in an “afterlife” is not at all helpful. And honestly, I think we need to be **away** more concerned about what happens **before** we die than worrying about what happens **after** we die!

Marcus Borg talks about this in an earlier book, “**The Heart of Christianity**” (which I know I’ve referred to before), where he says that the **problem** with this emphasis on “the afterlife” as the sum-total of what “salvation” means, is 3-fold:

**First** of all, whenever the afterlife is emphasized as “what salvation is all about”, the usual result is that **it turns Christianity into a religion of requirements**. If there is a heaven, the reasoning goes, then it doesn’t seem right that “just anybody” (and certainly not “everybody”!) gets to go there, so there must be something that **separates** those who get to go to heaven from those who don’t – namely, something that we “believe” or “do” – in other words, a “**rule**”, a “**requirement**” of some kind.

The **second** problem with this emphasis on the afterlife is that **it creates a distinction between an “in group” and an “out group”**. There are those who are “saved” and those who are “damned”.

The **third** problem is that emphasizing an afterlife **focuses our attention on the “next” world** (whatever that means!) **rather than on the transformation of this world**. We’ve all heard that expression that someone is “*so heavenly-minded that they’re of no earthly use*”. I also love the words of Mahatma Gandhi who said: “*Live the life now that you would have for the world in the future*”. God knows our world is desperately in need of our care and attention **right now** – never mind the “next world”! [Something to keep in mind on the eve of a federal election.]

The Biblical understanding of “salvation” is focused **overwhelmingly** on life in **this** world, not the next!

Salvation – [in the biblical tradition] – has to do, primarily, **with this life**. Salvation is centrally concerned with **our life here and now, in this world**.

And so we ask: **what on earth does “salvation” mean?**

We are provided with an initial clue when we explore the linguistic root of the English word “salvation”. It comes from the same root as the word “**salve**”, a healing ointment, a balm. And that, in turn, reminds me of the haunting, poignant and plaintive cry of the prophet Jeremiah: “*The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved. Is there no balm in Gilead? [Is there no “salve”, no “healing ointment”, no “polysporin”?] Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?*”

Salvation has to do with healing – “**healing the wounds of existence**” – the normal day-to-day challenges and obstacles that are part of being a human being – some of which we bring on ourselves, some of which are inflicted on us by others – intentionally by enemies, or unintentionally by strangers or friends or even (most painfully) by those we love and trust the most.

Today, I want to say just 3 other things about “salvation”:

First of all, salvation is personal, but this hardly needs saying! We are accustomed to talking about salvation in personal terms. Whatever language we use – [liberation, forgiveness, transformation, reconciliation, enlightenment, resurrection] – my guess is that most of us – [most of the time] – hear these words and apply them to ourselves in a personal way, to our own individual lives and circumstances. And this is fine – they do apply to our personal lives in a powerful way. **But this is not enough; it’s only the beginning!**

And so, secondly, we need to say that salvation – [in its most authentic biblical sense] – is also social – it’s communal. The story of ancient Israel – [the exodus, the exile, the radical messages of the Hebrew prophets] – is a story about the creation of a people – a new people – a nation - a community.

Salvation is about our life together. It’s about peace and justice within community. It’s about “shalom”, a word connoting not simply “**peace as the absence of war**”, but as “**the wholeness of community living together in peace and justice**”. Salvation is never only an “individual matter” in the Hebrew bible.

This emphasis on “social salvation” continues in the New Testament. In the teachings of Jesus, social salvation is at the very heart of almost everything Jesus said and did – “**the Realm of God**”, “**the community of God**”, “**the Kingdom of God**”. And Paul also recognized a “social” salvation as well as a “personal” one – in his desire to create communities “**in Christ**” – communities whose life together embodied an alternative vision to the one of “imperialism” and “empire” and “power over”.

Over all, the Bible is not about the saving of individuals “for heaven” – [or “from hell”] – it’s about creating a **new social order**, a **new personal reality**, a **new way of living in the world here and now**.

The third and final thing to say in relation to “salvation” this morning is that **God’s actions always invite a response**. Without our response, nothing will change in our lives or in the life of the world.

The word “sin” is another of those religious words that has all but lost its real meaning. Sin is not so much about “breaking the rules” or “disobeying the commandments” as it is about: ***“the uneasy feeling that all is not right, that there is a gap between the ideal and the actual – between the way we want to live our lives and the way we actually live our lives - in our relationship with our own deepest selves, our relationship with others, our relationship with God. It is the sense of being lost, disconnected, of longing for home.”***

The word that comes to mind for me when we talk about that “**uneasy feeling**”, that “**sense of being lost or disconnected**”, is the word “disease” – “**dis-ease**”. “Sin” is when we have a sense of “dis-ease” about our relationship with self, others and God. So if “sin” is “dis-ease”, **then salvation is the “healing balm” (the ointment, the salve) that helps to heal the “dis-ease” and make us whole once more.**

All of which begs the question: **What is a “healing balm” for us? What is it that helps to “heal” that “dis-ease”, that “dis-connect” between us and God. What “saves us” from “separation” from God?**

Well, it’s undoubtedly different things for different people. For some it may be worship or prayer or meditation...maybe its music...maybe its art...maybe it’s immersing oneself in nature, in creation...maybe it’s reading a good book...maybe its spending quality time with a trusted friend, a partner, or a lover.

Maybe none of these sound as “sexy” or “exciting” as being “**saved from the fiery flames of hell for all eternity**” - but I think, [in the long run], they’re far more “**helpful**”...I think they’re more “**real**”...and they’re certainly more “**healing**”.

Salvation is “**the dream of God**” - God’s dream for this **world**. It’s about being “born anew” - and it’s about the “Realm of God” here on earth.

It's about the transformation of life – individually and together – here and now.

Salvation is about life with God, life in the presence of God, now and always.

Thanks be to God!

Resources: “Speaking Christian”, Marcus Borg  
“The God We Never Knew”, Marcus Borg  
“The Heart of Christianity”, Marcus Borg

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